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Futurewise Challenging Benton County Planning: Sprawl Still Unsustainable in Rural Areas

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[Richland, Washington; April 20, 2018] Yesterday, Futurewise filed an appeal of the Benton County Comprehensive Plan on the grounds that sprawling development is unsustainable in rural areas without adequate planning for drinking water. The county's comprehensive plan assumes the high end of state population growth projections, or 6,794 more people in the rural area in the next 20 years. Water resource planning efforts in the lower Yakima River have made clear that water in Benton County is already allocated and flows in the river are too low for salmon and steelhead outmigration and rearing.

This appeal will be the first to address the applicability of the State Legislature's so-called *Hirst* fix bill (SB 6091) to planning for growth in the Yakima River basin. According to the bill, counties in the Yakima basin are mandated to plan for the use of land consistent with available water resources under the Growth Management Act (GMA).

Analysis by the State and other sources show that throughout Benton County, all of the water is already allocated, and more water withdrawals will harm fish and wildlife, and lead to unpredictability for rural home owners and developers. Additionally, in two of the three basins in Benton County, the impacts of climate change will reduce the amount of water available by 2035, which is within the 20-year planning horizon for the current comprehensive plan update.

Prior to filing the appeal, Futurewise closely followed the Benton County planning process, and recommended several changes that were eventually adopted by County Commissioners.

"Benton County made a lot of positive changes to their plan, including adopting a number of provisions that will protect critical areas and water quality," said Christopher Wierzbicki, Futurewise Executive Director. "But in the long run, the county's commitment to monitoring growth and addressing water availability issues as they develop are putting the cart before the horse. Good planning requires that these problems be identified and mitigated before they adversely impact communities, the economy, and the environment."

The Futurewise appeal also addresses Benton County's lack of analysis and planning for impacts on the state highway system resulting from the projected population increases in the rural area – as is required by the GMA. Futurewise Tri-Cities Program Manager, Alison Cable, expressed optimism about the appeal's potential outcomes. "A strong economy, reasonable housing prices and a moderate climate are going to continue to contribute to a growing population to Benton County. We need to start tackling these tough issues today to ensure an economically viable region that supports the next generation."